



[Ray Alexander, 1913 - 2004](#)

Organised as Working Women

We have seen, by working through the readings of Zetkin, Kollontai, Luxemburg, Lenin, the Comintern and the Women's Charter of the Federation of South African Women (FEDSAW; otherwise called FSAW), that the class context, and also the South African liberation-movement context, makes the clear understanding of women's mass organisation very critical. Women's mass organisation is necessary, but it is not easy. The difficulties come mainly from within the movement.

To sum up: Women are not a separate class, which can be organised against men. Women are not exempt from class struggle, but are as divided by class as men are, and divided into the same classes as men are. Yet women, and working women in

particular, do have a common basis for organisation as a distinct and self-conscious mass.

Today's text (see attached and the link below) is an excerpt from Cheryl Walker's 1982 book "Women and Resistance in South Africa". It concerns the position of FEDSAW in relation to the apartheid regime, and also in relation to the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL), in the period following FEDSAW's founding in 1954.

The ANCWL had been founded in 1948; and the ANC was an Africans-only organisation until the 1969 National Conference of the ANC in Morogoro, Tanzania. There was therefore an objective need to organise women on a wider basis than that of the ANCWL. They could have been organised separately, on racial lines, but in fact they chose to organise on non-racial lines.

Among the leaders were Ray Alexander, Dora Tamana, Josie Mphama, and Florence Matomela, who was awarded the Order of Luthuli in Gold in the 2014 Freedom Day honours list.

As we noted, the 1954 formation of FEDSAW, intended as a non-racial women's movement in South Africa, and the simultaneous adoption of the Women's Charter, prefigured the Congress of the People and the adoption of the Freedom Charter which happened in the following year, 1955.

All of that was to the good, but it is also clear from Walker's account that the relationship between FEDSAW and the ANCWL was problematic in the 1950s. It is equally clear that very similar

problems continue, more than half a century later, to arise between, for example, the ANCWL and the Progressive Women's Movement (PWM) that was launched in August 2006. In the 1950s, and again in the 2000s, the question of whether to have individual membership, or not, was at issue. Here is some of what Walker has to say about this:

"There were two alternatives. Either the FSAW could seek its own mass membership or it could base itself on a federal form, acquiring its members indirectly through each of its affiliated member organisations. The matter was not settled at the inaugural conference. A draft constitution proposing the first alternative – a mass, individual membership – was circulated but failed to win overall approval. Ray Alexander, and later the NEC based in Cape Town, supported this constitution, but Ida Mtwana and, it would seem, the ANCWL in the Transvaal, wanted a federal structure.

"In opposing Alexander, Mtwana spoke on behalf of the Transvaal ANCWL, acting, apparently, on the instructions of the provincial ANC. Their main fear was that, if the FSAW were constituted on the basis of an individual membership, it would compete against the ANCWL to the detriment of the latter. In taking this position, the ANC revealed a degree of ambivalence towards the FSAW that it would never entirely overcome. While supporting and welcoming the entry of women into the national liberation movement, it was anxious to retain control over their activities – a control it could exercise effectively over the

Women's League but not so successfully over an independent FSAW.

“At the heart of the debate between these two alternatives there thus lay a matter of central importance – the relationship between the FSAW and ANC; the relationship between the women's movement and the senior partner in the national liberation movement. The ANC was adamant on the issue and finally, reluctantly, the individual membership group yielded towards the end of 1954. They conceded not because they had been convinced by the other group's arguments but because they realised that without the support of the ANC, the women's movement would be isolated from the Congress Alliance.”

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [FedSAW, NEC and Membership in 1955, Cheryl Walker, 1982.](#)
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